

Facing danger on the ice fields

By MIKE RIPLINGER
Of the Emerald

"The idea is not to fall."

Once that is firmly in mind, the adventurous, and sometimes dangerous sport of ice climbing makes a little more sense, says veteran climber Steve Guthrie.

The process of ice climbing is fairly simple. The climber hacks a trail up the side of a mountain of ice, using only ice axes and crampons.

"It isn't so insane," says Guthrie, a University graduate student in physical education. He has been climbing for the last 10 years and has taught it, among other outdoor activities, at the University for the last five.

"It is a demanding sport that gives you a variety of different situations to try and overcome," Guthrie says.

Ice climbing is rock climbing's colder cousin, but the two have certain differences, he says.

But both sports share a common danger — falling. Ice climbers are particularly susceptible to this, because they are not always able to get as secure an anchor as a rock climber can.

Then add dangers from avalanches and severe weather conditions. Avalanches especially take their toll.

Guthrie has lost a couple of friends to the falling snowfields. He was involved in a search for another climber who was swept to his death on Mount Hood in 1975. Guthrie's own brush with avalanches came when an avalanche broke through the middle of his climbing party. The avalanche caught and swept away two members of the party. Luckily, a third was firmly anchored and

able to save them.

Unexpected storms also cause problems. Guthrie was in a climbing expedition that air-dropped into British Columbia. Unfortunately the expedition couldn't find a cache of food and was forced to go hungry.

"It was kind of traumatic," Guthrie says. "We went two days without food before finally finding it."

"Just then a storm came in that kept us in our tents for three more days."

When asked about the expedition's chances of surviving if they hadn't found the food, Guthrie replied, "Well not too good, not too good at all... like you wouldn't be here doing this story on me right now."

But some things make it all worth it. One was a birds-eye view of the Mt. St. Helens eruption. Guthrie was leading a climbing class from the University up neighboring Mount Hood at the time. Fifteen minutes after getting their first glimpse of St. Helens, it exploded.

The thrill of adventure and accomplishment pulls people like Guthrie to chance the dangers. Normally, ice climbing isn't too dangerous if the correct precautions are taken.

It is the unforeseen mishaps like the avalanches or storms that cause the deaths.

But the mark of a good climber is not only knowing how to climb, but also when and when not to take risks. To be a great climber, you have to improve by taking risks, according to Guthrie. Yet that is something he isn't ready to do.

"I don't take many risks," said Guthrie. "So I guess I'll never be a great climber. I enjoy other things too much."



Photo courtesy of Steve Guthrie

Ice climbing near Mt. St. Helens — before the eruptions

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